



The Connection Culture:
A New Source of
Competitive Advantage
By Michael Lee Stallard

The Connection Culture

I want to share something with you I've learned over the last decade of my life that I believe can be as helpful to you as it has been to me. In a nutshell, *one of the most powerful and least understood aspects of business is how a feeling of connection between management, employees and customers provides a competitive advantage. Unless the people who are part of a business feel a sense of connection—a bond that promotes trust, cooperation and esprit de corps—they will never reach their potential as individuals, nor will the organization.*

An organization with a high degree of connection has employees who are more engaged, more productive in their jobs, and less likely to leave the organization for a competitor. Organizations with greater connection also have employees who share more information with their colleagues and, therefore, help decision-makers make better-informed decisions and help innovators innovate. Connection is what transforms a dog-eat-dog environment into a sled dog team that pulls together.

So what is connection anyway? When we interact with people, we generally feel that we connect with some and not with others. Phrases such as “we really connected” and “we just didn’t connect” are common in our daily conversations. Connection describes something intangible we sense in relationships. When connection is present, we feel energy, empathy, affirmation and are more open. When it is absent, we experience neutral or even negative feelings. Although we know what it’s like to *feel* connected on a personal level, few among us *understand* the effect connection has on us and on the organizations we work in.

Let me first explain the power of connection by sharing some observations and insights that emerged out of my personal experiences.

I left Wall Street in May of 2002 and began researching and writing a book on some ideas I had been considering about how to motivate people who work on the front lines of a business directly with customers. In addition to doing research in the fields of organizational behavior, psychology, sociology, history, political science and systems theory, I did a great deal of reflecting about my own experiences in life. And to my surprise, many of the things I learned came from some of the least expected places.

In late 2002, my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. Fortunately, it was detected early, removed by surgery and treated with radiation. During the course of Katie's treatments at our local hospital, we were comforted by the kindness and compassion that many of the healthcare workers showed us during this difficult time. We discovered that some of them were cancer survivors themselves. Because they had experienced cancer as patients, they knew what we were going through, and they went beyond the duties of their jobs to comfort and encourage us. The connection we felt with them boosted our spirits.

Over the course of 2003 I continued researching and writing about connection. In December, during Katie's quarterly checkup, some of the tests indicated that she might have ovarian cancer. The day of her surgery in early 2004 was one of the most sobering of my life. After Kate had been in the operating room for more than three hours, I knew it wasn't good, and I started having a hard time breathing. Shortly thereafter, Katie's surgeon came out and told me she did have ovarian cancer, and that it had spread some. I remember him telling me that he was sorry. That night, I went with Katie's mom and my daughters Sarah and Elizabeth—12 and 10 years of age at the time—to see Kate in the ICU. She looked pale and tired. Seeing her so weak and glassy-eyed scared the girls. Sarah backed up against a wall and began to faint. After an ICU nurse helped us revive her, we made our way out of the hospital. Walking through the empty hospital lobby, Elizabeth began to sob. I knelt down beside her and Sarah and I wrapped our arms around her until Elizabeth regained her composure. At bedtime, the girls crawled into our bed. We prayed for God to watch over Katie and the girls fell off to sleep. I'll never forget that night seeing them snuggled up together, asleep on

their mom's pillow. I recall how utterly alone I felt, afraid of what the future might hold for our family. The thought of Katie not seeing the girls grow up and the girls losing such a wonderful, loving mother made me sad beyond anything I had ever felt.

During the first half of 2004, Katie had her initial six chemotherapy treatments. She took a break from chemo over the summer before starting a second round of treatments, this time high dosage chemotherapy at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. Our experience at Sloan-Kettering really surprised me. Every time we approached the front doors of the 53rd Street entrance in midtown Manhattan, the exuberant doormen locked their eyes on us and greeted us with big, warm smiles as if we were friends coming to visit. The receptionist and security people were equally friendly. During our first office visit with Katie's oncologist, Dr. Martee Hensley, she spent an hour educating us, and, although the statistics she shared were sobering, Dr. Hensley's warm disposition and optimistic attitude lifted our spirits and gave us hope. Simply put, we connected with the people at Sloan-Kettering, and it encouraged us and made us more optimistic.

One day during Katie's chemo treatment, I went to the gift shop to get something to drink and stumbled on a meeting in the adjacent lounge where Sloan-Kettering employees who worked at that location were discussing the results of an employee survey. I overheard them share that they loved working there because they loved their colleagues, their patients, and their cause—

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which is to provide what is stated on all their printed materials, “...*the best cancer care, anywhere.*” It was apparent that those healthcare professionals had formed a connection with one another and with their patients. During the time we spent at Sloan-Kettering, it struck me that there was more joy and *esprit de corps* in the atmosphere there than in 95% of the offices I had been in over my career. Who would have guessed that a place that treated cancer could have such a vibrant and positive atmosphere?

Today, I’m overjoyed to say, Katie is in remission and she feels great. Reflecting back on those days, I’m convinced that the connection we felt from the tremendous outpouring of care provided by healthcare workers, friends and family helped Katie overcome cancer and protected our family’s spirits. I recall reading an American Cancer Society publication that said one of the worst things for cancer patients is to feel alone. We rarely felt alone because we were constantly reminded that many, many people were pulling for us. We regularly had people stop by to visit. The visits weren’t somber occasions, quite the contrary. We talked and laughed and enjoyed one another’s company. Christian, Jewish and Muslim friends told us they were praying for Katie and our family. Even our atheist friends said they were sending positive thoughts our way. All of this was very moving and encouraging to us—we knew that we weren’t alone.

Having had such a good experience at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, we enthusiastically recommended it in 2005 to a friend of ours who was diagnosed with cancer. Because her cancer was not the type of cancer Katie had, our friend went to a different location at Sloan-Kettering for her initial consultation. Surprisingly, her experience was completely at odds with ours. After one visit where she felt alone and unwelcome, she never returned and instead decided to seek treatment elsewhere.

Reflecting on these experiences made me realize three things:

- First, connection is a powerful force that creates a positive bond between people based on both rational and emotional factors.
- Second, connection contributes to bringing out the best in people—it energizes them, makes them more trusting and resilient to face life’s inevitable difficulties.
- Third, connection can vary tremendously across organizations depending upon local culture and leadership.

In recent years, neuroscientists have discovered that connection has a physiological effect on people. More specifically, it reduces the blood levels of the stress hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol. It increases the neurotransmitter dopamine, which enhances attention and pleasure, and serotonin, which reduces fear and worry. Connection also increases the levels of oxytocin and/or vasopressin that make us more trusting of others. And this is consistent with our personal experience. Connection provides a sense of well-being, reduces stress, and makes us more trusting.

Those discoveries about connection are also confirmed by the observations of psychiatrists. Dr. Edward Hallowell, a practicing psychiatrist and instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has written that most of the business executives he encounters in his practice are deprived of connection with others, and he has observed that it makes them feel lonely, isolated, and confused at work. He also believes that people in organizations with a deficiency of connection become distrusting, disrespectful and dissatisfied. He describes these cultures that lack connection as corrosive. To treat patients suffering from emotional isolation, Dr. Hallowell helps them increase connection in their lives.

Other research establishes that connection improves mental and physical health throughout our lives as well. Consider the following:

- Babies who feel connected because they are held, stroked and cuddled are healthier.
- Elementary school students who receive more affirming eye contact from teachers perform better academically.
- Adolescents who feel connected at home and at school are more well-adjusted.
- Patients with greater social support recover faster.
- People who experience positive human contact are more creative and better problem-solvers (and separate research has shown that people who feel relationally disconnected are more prone to irrational and self-defeating acts).
- Adults with more social relationships are less prone to depression and suicide.
- Seniors with more social support live longer.

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All of this evidence begs the question, “What is it about connection that makes it so powerful?” Without going too far into the psychology of connection, let me just summarize by saying simply that we are humans, not machines. We have emotions. We have hopes and dreams. We have a conscience. We have deeply felt human needs to be respected, to be recognized for our talents, to belong, to have autonomy or control over our work, to experience personal growth, and to do work that we feel is worthwhile in a way that we feel is ethical. When we work in an environment that recognizes these realities of our human nature, we thrive. We feel more energetic, more optimistic, and more fully alive. When we work in an environment that fails to recognize this, it is damaging to our mental and physical health.

And when you think about it, that makes sense. Let’s consider how this plays out in the workplace. When we first meet people, we expect them to respect us. If they look down on us, if they are uncivil or condescending, we get upset. In time, as our colleagues get to know us, we expect them to appreciate or recognize us for our talents and contributions. That really makes us feel good. Later on, we begin to expect that we will be treated and thought of as an integral part of the community. Our connection to the group is further strengthened when we feel we have control over our work. Connection is diminished when we feel we are being micro-managed or over-controlled by others. If we are over-controlled, it sends the message that we are being treated like children or incompetents, and it’s a sign that we are not trusted or respected. Connection is also enhanced when we experience personal growth. In other words: when our role, our work in the group, is a good fit with our skills, providing enough challenge to make us feel good when we rise to meet that challenge (but not so much challenge that we become totally stressed out). Finally, it motivates us to know our work is worthwhile in some way and to be around other people who share our belief that our work is important. To the extent that these human needs of respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth and meaning are met, we feel connected to the group. When they are not met, we feel less connected, or even disconnected.

The bottom line is that connection plays a critical part in improving individual performance. People who are more connected with others fare better in life than those who are less connected. Connection, because it meets our human needs, makes people more trusting, more cooperative, more empathetic, more enthusiastic, more optimistic, more energetic, more creative and better problem solvers. It creates the type of environment in which people want to help their colleagues. They are more open to share information that helps decision makers become better-informed. The openness that emerges in a trusting and cooperative environment creates a robust marketplace of ideas that stimulates innovation.

Connection among people improves performance in an organization and creates a new source of competitive advantage.

The Gallup Organization has done extensive research in this area. One measure of connection is Gallup's Q12 survey that asks questions such as whether people care about you at work, encourage your development, and seek and consider your opinion. In 2002, the Gallup Organization published the results of landmark research that tracked nearly 8,000 business units over seven years. The research showed that business units with higher Q12 scores—in other words, higher connection—experienced higher productivity, higher profitability, and higher customer satisfaction as well as lower employee turnover and fewer accidents. And that makes sense, doesn't it, given what we know about the positive effects of connection on people.

I hope by now that you see and believe that fostering connection in the marketplace is a win-win for individuals and for organizations. It's too important for you to ignore.

For those of you who see the value of connection, I want to show you how you can bring it out in the workplace by creating a Connection Culture—a culture with the necessary elements to meet our human needs. **The core elements of a Connection Culture that meet these human needs are Vision, Value, and Voice.**

VISION

The first element of a Connection Culture is Vision, and it exists when everyone in an organization is motivated by the organization's mission, united by its values, and proud of its reputation. When people share a purpose or set of beliefs they're proud of, it unites and motivates them. At Memorial Sloan-Kettering they are united and motivated by the aspiration stated in their tagline, "the best cancer care, anywhere," and the organization's reputation as one of the leading cancer centers in the world.

Another example of Vision was Apple Computer's "Think Different" advertising campaign. It was conceived following Steve Jobs' return to Apple in 1996 after a 12-year exile. As you may recall, Apple had booted Jobs and brought in an outsider to take Apple to the next level, which never happened. So the board of directors turned back to Steve Jobs for help. One of the first things Jobs did when he returned was to work with Apple's ad agency to create the "Think Different" ad campaign. It featured pictures of innovators in science, in philosophy, and in the arts such as Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, the dancer/choreographer Martha Graham, the photographer Ansel Adams, Richard Feynman the physicist, and Pablo Picasso. The campaign communicated that Apple people were more than technologists, they were innovators and artists who gave others like themselves the tools to change the world. The result was that it created a powerful bond, a connection between Jobs, Apple employees, and Apple customers (who are, by the way, intensely loyal and evangelistic when it comes to spreading the gospel of Apple).

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The late Dame Anita Roddick did the same thing at The Body Shop by promoting all natural cosmetic products that were environmentally friendly, didn't rely on animal testing and were produced by companies in the developing world. For many years The Body Shop was growing by 50 percent a year, even through a recession.

Another one of my favorite examples of a brilliant leader who brought Vision to a group of people goes back a few years. During World War II President Franklin Delano Roosevelt traveled to Seattle, Washington to meet with 18,000 aircraft workers at Boeing Corporation. FDR brought with him a young airplane pilot named Hewitt Wheless from Texas. The pilot had escaped death thanks to the resilience of the bullet-riddled B-17 plane he flew out of harm's way. His plane had been built at that very Boeing plant. Do you think seeing and hearing that young pilot thank them for saving his life connected them to a common cause? You bet it did. It transformed those welders and riveters into freedom fighters. From 1941 until 1945 American aircraft companies out-produced the Nazis three-to-one, building nearly 300,000 airplanes.

VALUE

The second element of a Connection Culture is that people are truly valued. My colleagues and I refer to this element in a culture simply as “Value.” It means that everyone in an organization understands the universal nature of people, appreciates the unique contribution of each person, and helps them achieve their potential.

Here are some examples of what Value looks like in a culture. David Neeleman, the Chairman of Jet Blue, met with 95 percent of new employees when he was CEO, showing them on day one that he valued them. He also set aside one day each week to travel on Jet Blue flights where he served beverages and got down on his hands and knees to clean planes. This showed that he didn't de-value the work done by even the lowest level employees at Jet Blue. Nothing he asked them to do was beneath him. Throughout the course of the day the high energy and outgoing Neeleman constantly connected with crew members and passengers. This showed that he valued people enough to take the time to connect with them. Neeleman knew that connection is important. In fact, he has said that most airlines treat passengers like cattle, and that Jet Blue is different because they make personal connections with their passengers. Do you suppose people want to work at a place like that? In 2002, when Jet Blue had 2,000 crew member positions to fill, it received 130,000 applications.

Another example is Jack Mitchell, the CEO of Mitchells/Richards/Marshs, a high-end clothing store with locations in Connecticut and Long Island. Mitchells/Richard/Marshs was the 2002 Menswear Retailer of the Year. Jack Mitchell describes his philosophy as “hugging” employees and customers by treating employees like family and customers like friends. He coaches employees to help them achieve their potential. When they are sick, he reaches out to them. He gives them autonomy. For example, when one older sales person needed to take a short nap in the afternoons to get re-energized, Jack said that that made sense to him.

Value also includes protecting people from abuses such as incivility, sexual misconduct or prejudice—actions that make people feel disconnected from their community because it failed to protect them. On a few rare occasions, Jack Mitchell has told customers to take their business elsewhere when they became verbally abusive to one of his employees.

Allan Loren, who led the turnaround of Dun and Bradstreet, showed people he valued them when he established a rule that no meeting would be scheduled on Mondays or Fridays if it required people to travel over the weekend. This shows that he cared enough to protect their personal time. Loren also valued employees enough to want to see them grow, so he matched everyone in the organization with a buddy who would give them continuous feedback about how they were doing in terms of their personal growth goals. Buddies were selected based on their strengths in those areas that a particular employee wanted to improve upon. Allan Loren also showed he valued people by having employee satisfaction surveys completed twice each year to see how people were doing.

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Carl Sewell, CEO of Sewell Automotive in Dallas, one of the most successful automobile retailers nationwide, intentionally hires caring people and nurtures a caring culture that creates connection among employees and customers. His passion for hiring caring people intensified after he was treated for cancer at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Carl Sewell knows first-hand just how uplifting it is when we meet someone who really cares about us.

VOICE

The third element of a Connection Culture is Voice. The element of Voice exists when everyone in an organization participates in an open, honest and safe environment where people share their opinions in order to understand one another and seek the best ideas. When people's ideas and opinions are sought and considered, it helps meet the human needs for respect, recognition and belonging. "Being in the loop," so to speak, makes people feel connected to their colleagues, just as being "out of the loop" makes people feel disconnected.

A.G. Lafley, the CEO of Procter & Gamble, is a master of using Voice to boost the performance of the organization he leads. Lafley actively seeks people's views. When he meets with people, he will tell them what's honestly on his mind before he asks them to share what issues they are thinking about. He encourages them to "get the moose out of the closet" before they grow into bigger problems. When he first became CEO, Lafley conducted an employee survey to get their ideas, and he ended up implementing many of them. In his interactions with people, Lafley makes it all about them rather than all about him, and the results he has helped produce have been stunning. When he became CEO, P&G was performing poorly and morale was low. In his first 12 months, Lafley led an effort that resulted in a two and a half times increase in employee approval of P&G's leadership and a soaring profitability and stock price—so much so that P&G was able to acquire the Gillette Corporation.

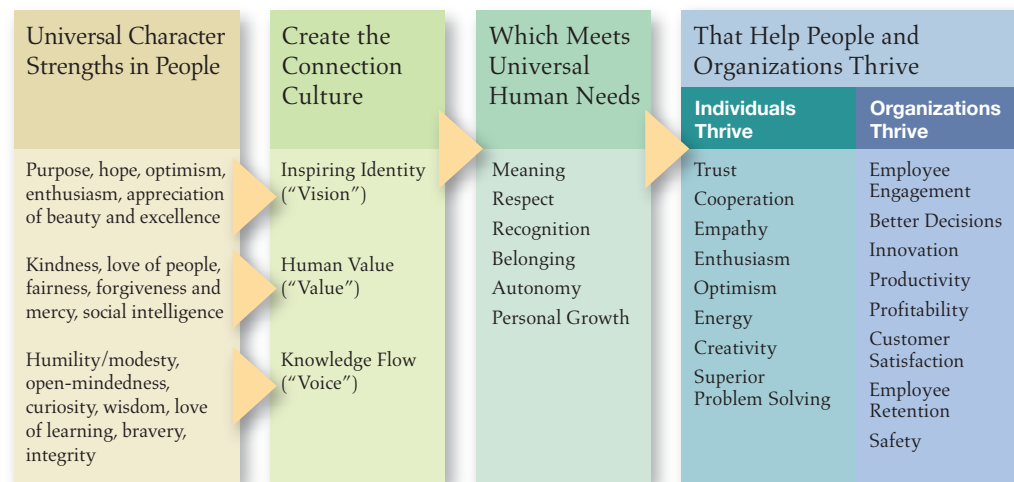
A good way to remember the elements in a Connection Culture is to remember the following formula:

Vision + Value + Voice = Connection

When these elements of a Connection Culture are in place, it's a win-win for individuals and organizations.

What kind of people make a Connection Culture happen? In my research I had an “aha moment” when I saw the clear link between certain character strengths and the elements in a Connection Culture. I was studying the field of positive psychology and the twenty-four character strengths that have been identified as being universal across cultures and religions. The positive psychologists believe these universal character strengths, viewed favorably by moral philosophers and religious thinkers throughout history, improve mental and physical health and favor the survival of civilizations. At E Pluribus Partners, we believe these character strengths improve the mental and physical health of people in organizations and favor the survival of organizations too. For example, when individuals possess the character strengths of humility/modesty, open-mindedness, curiosity, wisdom, love of learning, bravery and integrity, the element of Voice will be present in a culture. The Character>Connection>Thrive Chain below shows how all of this fits together. Starting from the left side of the diagram you can see that universal character strengths support the elements that create a Connection Culture. When a Connection Culture exists, the universal human needs are met that help individuals and organizations thrive.

THE CHARACTER ► CONNECTION ► THRIVE CHAIN



The bottom line is that we all need strength of character and connection to thrive at work and in life. Here are a few suggestions about how to get started:

1. Everyone should understand what connection truly is and continuously strive to increase it among the people with whom they live and work.
2. Identify the Vision that will unite and motivate everyone in your business. That Vision may be becoming the best at what you do, it may be bringing something new to the world or conducting your business in a way that reflects your values. Charles Schwab's Vision is to create "the most useful and ethical financial products in the world." Disney's Vision is to "make people happy." E Pluribus Partners' Vision is to "unlock human and corporate potential." To jump start the process, get your most motivated people in a room and ask them when they have felt proud of the company. Listen to their stories and you'll likely find a Vision to rally around.
3. Get to know the personal stories of the people you live and work alongside. Learn what has made them happy and what has disappointed them. Find out what their professional and personal hopes are for the future. As people get to know one another, Value will increase and connection will be strengthened.
4. Like A.G. Lafley at Procter and Gamble, all leaders should regularly meet with groups of people to hear the issues on their minds, to get the "moose out of the closet" so they can deal with them, and hear peoples' ideas about opportunities and threats to their business. Leaders should look for good suggestions they can implement. You won't believe how much it will fire up people to see their ideas come to life. This brings Voice to a culture and increases connection.

From Main Street to Wall Street, the wisest leaders are beginning to see the value of connection and community. Harley-Davidson has created a community around its riders, employees and management, and sponsors cross-country trips and road rallies. On Wall Street, Goldman Sachs is making its leadership training available to the promising leaders of its client companies in order to connect

with them before they rise up to the top jobs. In San Francisco the biotech company Genentech, which has been recognized by *Fortune* magazine as one of the best companies to work for, brings in cancer patients to meet its employees, throws weekly parties for employees to connect with one another, and celebrates big product breakthroughs with company-wide parties that feature top-name entertainers. At Southwest Airlines, the company learned that its performance at the gate improved when it maintained a 10-to-1 frontline employee-to-supervisor ratio because its supervisors could connect with, coach, and encourage those people. Many airlines have frontline employee-to-supervisor ratios as high as 40-to-1, making connection very difficult to maintain.

Ed Catmull, the head of Pixar Animation Studios, formed Pixar as an antidote to the disconnection that is the norm in the film production industry where independent contractors come together for a specific project and then disband upon the project's conclusion. In contrast to the independent contractor model, Pixar keeps the team together so that they build connection among them. Catmull also created Pixar University to increase connection across Pixar. Connection occurs at Pixar University when every employee, from the janitors to Catmull himself, spends four hours each week in classes with colleagues learning about the arts and animation, and most importantly, about each other. It's no coincidence that Pixar University's crest bears the Latin phrase "*Alienus Non Dieutius*," which translated means "alone no longer."

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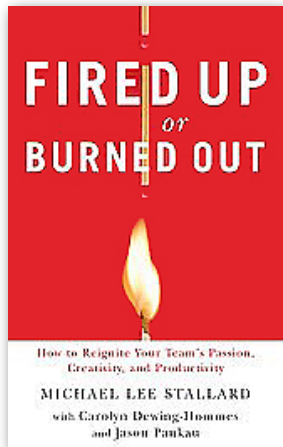
Companies that sow the seeds of disconnection are doomed. Could there be a better example than Enron, a company whose leaders nurtured a dog-eat-dog environment, where the book *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins was celebrated as a manifesto and traders boasted about their power to make grandmothers in California suffer from electricity rate increases and power outages? Leaders who nurture dog-eat-dog or even indifferent cultures may succeed for a while, but their success is built on feet of clay that will inevitably crumble. History is filled with examples of this recurring theme.

My heroes are the individuals who increase connection among the people around them, in their organizations and in society at large. Wherever you find great nations, companies, non-profits and sports teams, you will find these great men and women. George Washington, FDR, The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela, John Wooden, Dean Smith, Coach K at Duke and the business leaders I mentioned earlier are but a few of the leaders who increased connection over the course of history.

It was connection that inspired us to name our firm E Pluribus Partners. E Pluribus is a nod to *E Pluribus Unum*, the motto of the United States created by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. *E Pluribus Unum* is a Latin phrase that means “out of many, one.” It was connection that moved the hearts of people in towns across America to fly their flags and send money, firefighters and in some cases fire trucks to New York City and Washington, D.C. following the terrorist attacks on 9/11. At that time I worked in Midtown Manhattan and I can tell you that

New Yorkers were profoundly moved and inspired by the affection and support of their fellow Americans. Social commentator David Brooks, writing about American unity following September 11, likened us to one big family... we may have our differences but when one of our own is in trouble, we are there for one another. It was the same strength of connection that got us through the Depression and two world wars. It is connection that makes America so productive that with a mere five percent of the world's population we produce 30 percent of the world's economic output. Who would ever guess that a country made up of people from every corner of the world would come together like that? Imagine what could be done if more people were connected at work.

Connection is the key. It makes a difference in families, in workplaces, in schools, in volunteer organizations, in communities, and in nations. No one can thrive for long without it. 📌



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Lee Stallard is a leading authority on employee and customer engagement. He is the president, CEO and a co-founder of E Pluribus Partners, a consulting firm that specializes in helping leaders create "Connection Cultures" to form strong bonds among the management, employees and customers of an organization. Prior to founding E Pluribus Partners, Michael was chief marketing officer for businesses at Charles Schwab and Morgan Stanley. He was formerly an executive in investment banking, marketing and finance at Barclays PLC, Van Kampen Investments and Texas Instruments.

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